

# *The Mental Health Impact on Healthcare Workers in the United Kingdom during Covid-19*

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**Abstract:** Since the break-out of COVID-19, healthcare workers have faced many unpredictable challenges. Healthcare workers always play an important role in fighting COVID-19 but they are less well-supported in terms of mental health in the United Kingdom. The leaders focus on the mental health condition of COVID-19 patients more and neglect that of healthcare workers. This essay states the difficulties that healthcare workers in the United Kingdom have encountered. This essay also suggests that healthcare authorities should pay more attention to healthcare staff's mental health issues and conduct related measure to support them.

## **1. Introduction**

The third Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 'Ensure healthy lives and wellbeing for all at all ages'[1], which aims to decrease premature deaths caused by non-communicable diseases through preventive interventions and treatments and also promote mental health and wellbeing by 2030. For the purposes of this essay, healthcare workers are front line National Health Services (NHS) workers in COVID-19 ward in hospitals. They work for long hours with high levels of concentration in stressful circumstances led by possible traumas which means their being exposed to high levels of covid related mortality rates, moral injuries and unsatisfied salaries[2]. Therefore, their mental health problems led by their jobs increase daily as the severity of the situation progresses, especially during the period of the beginning of COVID-19. This essay will analyse the related factors according to current situation in the UK and provide recent insights on how to manage mental health challenges faced by health care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **1.1 Covid-19 in the United Kingdom**

In the UK, the first diagnosed COVID-19 case was identified on 30 January 2020 and the UK government started to practice an unprecedented lockdown on 24 March 2020[3]. As a of the delayed lockdown in the UK, the confirmed cases increased to over 11,000 before the official start of lockdown. In the latest 15-month period, the cumulative total number of positive COVID-19 tests is over 4.7 million and the total deaths caused by the COVID-19 is over 152,000[3]. However, under some certain useful policies introduced by the UK government, such as restricting people's outdoor activities, practising social distancing and wearing face coverings in indoors public places [4], this novel disease indeed has reduced the speed of spread.

## 1.2 The Impact on Healthcare Workers

Generally, the COVID-19 pandemic put all healthcare workers globally into an unknown challenge where they need to work on the front line under extreme mental pressure whilst combatting a deadly infection. It was reported that 883 health and social care workers died of COVID-19 between 9<sup>th</sup> March and 28<sup>th</sup> December 2020 in the UK[5]. Facing this hard and critical situation, healthcare workers who work on the frontline and are involved in the process of diagnosis and treatment for patients with COVID-19 are at great risk of being depressed, anxious and experiencing other mental health challenges[6]. Therefore, it is necessary to take action to address the mental health impact on healthcare staff during this crisis to meet the SDG target by 2030.

## 2. Comparison with the Situation Before the Covid-19

Health professionals are more likely to be stressed as they take responsibility for patients' lives and they play an important role in curing patients, and their mistakes might have a severe impact on patients' health[7]. According to Koinis' study[8] conducted in 2010, it highlighted that healthcare staff being exposed to high levels of stress for a long time might have an adverse impact on their work efficiency as well as lead to negative results on their own health and social life. This conclusion is similar to what staff have experienced during the COVID-19: they thought patients were not given enough effective treatments and resources by themselves, which made them feel guilty and even get depression [9]. In brief, it is undeniable that being exposed to a stressful working situation could lead a negative impact on life whenever staying at the period of COVID-19 or not.

## 3. The Impact on Healthcare Workers during Covid-19

### 3.1 Moral Injury

Moral injury is defined by Litz[10] as the psychological pressure led by actions, or the lack of them, and violating their moral or ethical norms in a certain level. Although moral injury is not a mental disorder as depression or anxiety, the thoughts and feelings produced by moral injury accelerates the deterioration of mental health problems, which involve depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and even suicidal thoughts. The critical situations faced by the soldiers and healthcare workers could let them generate negative feelings to develop mental disorder potentially.

Indeed, moral injury has been reported on medical students, who have amounts of difficulties to address with work problems in emergency departments[11]. Because in emergency departments, medical students without any clinical experience would always be exposed unpredictable emergencies and challenges which they do not feel prepared well for them. Many health care workers thought they had done all they could and provided all the available resources, but what they had done was not enough to save patients successfully. Therefore, addressing the mental health state of healthcare workers as a public health challenge is extremely important, especially in relation to reaching the SDG.

### 3.2 Psychiatric Symptoms

Healthcare workers are likely to have some psychiatric symptoms due to their job situations. According to a survey to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of UK healthcare professionals, conducted by Gilleen[6], the study included 2773 participants in total: 28.1% were for high depression, 33.1% for high anxiety and 27.5% for stress. Of all participants, 60.6% had

experienced a trauma related to COVID-19 and 14.6% had high PTSD symptoms related to COVID-19[6]. Therefore, these findings should be thought with caution as they cannot be representative all healthcare workers population in different places.

## **4. Challenges**

### **4.1 Experiences about Personal Protection Equipment (Ppe)**

Healthcare workers always faced challenges surrounding PPE no matter which phase the pandemic was in, globally. Healthcare staff firstly felt anxious due to the uncertain way to putting on and taking off PPE to avoid cross-infection and the shortage of PPE stock. Later, healthcare workers felt distressed as they need to work in full PPE with an increased workload and with less breaks than usual. As PPE is usually just one size, it may hurt staff and cause pains, and there were even reports of dehydration and overheating[12].

### **4.2 Impact of Social Media on Healthcare Workers during the Covid-19**

The continuous output of information and misinformation from social media could be quite distressing for everyone. Especially during the pandemic and lockdown, people would put more focus on updated news and generate unstable emotions easily through a minor change in daily data of COVID-19 cases. Yet, during the pandemic, the existence of amounts of social media could be beneficial and helpful to spread important information concerned about the newest situation and best measures and provide the useful resources to anyone who has access to the internet. It is undeniable that social media does give healthcare workers the feeling of anxiety and stress, but social media is a necessary part of our lives now and whether it is benefit for us to realise the third SDGs depends on the way in which we use them.

## **5. Management**

To combat the viral epidemic and protect the mental health of healthcare workers, relevant psychological interventions need to be practiced at once. One hospital in China set up a group with professional staff for mental health intervention, which included four subgroups: psychological response group, technical support group, medical group and hotline group respectively[13]. This team aimed to address and work with family difficulties, provide technical guidance and supervision, take clinical psychological intervention, and assist hotline calls to help deal with mental health problems. In Williams'[14] study, they summarised ten messages to support healthcare workers from the perspective of mental health. Of all the messages, the authors mentioned the importance of social media for healthcare staff and encouraged them to stay connected with supportive family members and friends and share positive news. In addition, the UK shows its appreciation in other visible ways. Healthcare workers may feel heart-warming and supported, which gives them more motivations to fight against the crisis.

## **6. Conclusions**

This essay contributes to our understanding of the current COVID-19 situation, the psychological impact, and related factors on healthcare workers in the UK during this pandemic. This essay also indicated that healthcare authorities should pay more attention to healthcare staff's mental health issues. The major limitation of this essay is that the analysis of related factors is not

comprehensive, as related research is insufficient. Further research needs to be conducted to assess the long-term impact on healthcare workers' mental health due to COVID-19.

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